

Seven Guitars

by August Wilson

Directed by Israel Hicks

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POST**

“Seven Guitars is about people battling society and themselves for self worth.”
~ Regina Taylor, “That’s Why They Call It the Blues.” *American Theatre*, April, 1996

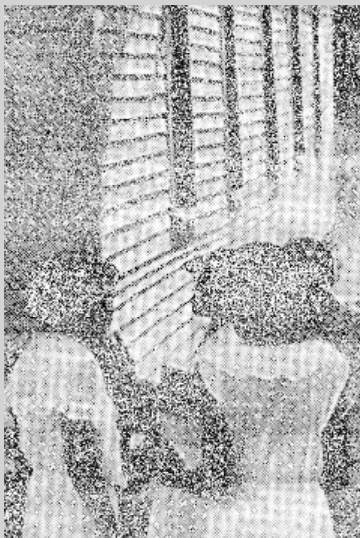
SYNOPSIS

by Sally R. Gass

**“You ain’t never seen nothing like Chicago—
Seem like everybody in the world in Chicago.”**
Floyd, *Seven Guitars*.

Pittsburgh, 1948: In Louise’s backyard, a group of friends gather after the funeral of Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton, whose sudden death has cut short a blues guitar career that had just been on the verge of taking off. The friends talk about the mysteries of Floyd’s death and the black-hatted angels who seemed to appear at the grave site to bear him away. To the sounds of his first hit recording, “That’s All Right,” the play jumps back in time to piece together the final days of Floyd’s life.

The play recounts Floyd coming home from his mother’s funeral with empty pockets and being stopped by the police and arrested for vagrancy. In the workhouse, Floyd discovers he has a hit record, but no hit record money. When released, he gets a letter from his white producer inviting him back to Chicago to cut another record. Floyd sees the summons as a promise that he will become a star—all he has to do is find a way to get enough money together for him and his band to return to Chicago.



In the backyard, we meet Floyd’s band members and his friends. Red Carter is the drummer who would happily return to Chicago if Floyd could get his drums out of hock. Canewell is the harmonica player who is reluctant to go back, though he hungers for fame. He is tired of the road and would like to put down roots. Then there is the tubercular Hedley, who earns his living processing chickens in his makeshift backyard slaughterhouse and dreams that the legendary New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden will come down and give him money for a plantation. The women of the play, a bit worn around the edges, epitomize love gone wrong. Vera, Floyd’s girlfriend, takes him back after he left her for another, but she’s ambivalent about going to Chicago. Louise, the landlady, has sworn off men and doesn’t want anyone knocking on her door anymore. And finally we meet Ruby, Louise’s promiscuous niece, who has just fled Alabama where one man killed another over her.

All of the characters, in one way or another, are involved with Floyd and his strategy to obtain the money to go to Chicago. But Floyd’s plans appear to be ruined when he discovers that the agent who was to finance the trip has been arrested. His only recourse is to use the money he’s been saving for a marker for his mother’s grave. But that’s not nearly enough, so Floyd takes a chance—a gamble that changes everything for Floyd and leads us to the secret behind his death.

**“All I want is you to get out of my way.
I got somewhere to go—.”** ~ Floyd, *Seven Guitars*.

The blues occur when the Negro is sad, when he is far from his home, his mother or his sweetheart. Then he thinks of a motif or a preferred rhythm and takes his trombone or his violin or his banjo or his clarinet or his drum or else he sings or simply dances. And on the chosen motif, he plumbs the depths of his imagination. This makes his sadness pass way—it is the Blues.

~ Ernest Ansermet, 1918.

There are repeated themes in *Seven Guitars* that move back and forth, from character to character, with each character playing on the theme in his or her unique way. It is the themes of the characters’ conversations, their “blues” or “music” that form the meat of the play, allowing the audience to know each of them and to see his/her connection to one another.

THEMES OF *SEVEN GUITARS*

by Sally R. Gass

“I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, A culture that had grown out of our experiences of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the Urban North have not been hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we could have strengthened the culture.”

~ August Wilson, in an interview with Bill Moyers. ¹

One of the themes is chickens. While Hedley processes his chickens for sandwiches, the other men strut around the backyard in their Pittsburgh neighborhood like roosters scratching for territory. They crow in unison, each with his own voice, and they peck at each other as they “strut their stuff.” For example, Floyd and Canewell criticize Red’s cigars and compare them to more expensive brands. In another scene, they extol the merits of their weapon of choice, be it gun or knife.

Next to the backyard, is Miss Tillery’s barnyard and her rooster, which announces itself in the second scene and becomes the object of comic abuse as well as a symbol of the dilemma of this shifting black population. Floyd says the rooster makes too much noise and would never be allowed in Chicago. To Canewell, the rooster is a reminder of the painful past. “The rooster didn’t crow during slavery,” he says. “If you think I’m lying, go and find you somebody from back in slavery time and ask them if they ever heard a rooster crow.” ² Hedley, after hearing all the grousing about the rooster, bolts from the backyard and returns with the bird. He tells the group that God is not going to make any more roosters, and maybe He won’t make any more black men either. Hedley continues: “You hear the rooster, you know you’re alive.” ³ Then Hedley wrings its neck and slits its throat. This chilling moment is both a curse and a prophecy. As Wilson says: “Hedley’s whole warning is ‘If the rooster has become useless, then what about you? Maybe you’ll become useless, too.’ If you don’t connect to the past, then you don’t know who you are in the present. You may prove to be unworthy of the past.” ⁴

One connection to the past is food. The recipes of the black South bring sustenance and comfort to these characters. The play opens with sweet potato pie being served at Floyd’s funeral; later, Louise threatens Hedley with no more plates of collard greens and black-eyed peas if he doesn’t bring her cigarettes. Vera is going to make chicken, green beans, potatoes, and corn bread for Floyd’s workhouse release dinner. As Louise and Vera “dish the dirt” about men in Act I Scene 4, they are preparing food.

Finally, there is Canewell’s comparison of a woman to a watermelon, and his recipe for fixing turnip greens; in his eyes, it is a recipe for happiness.

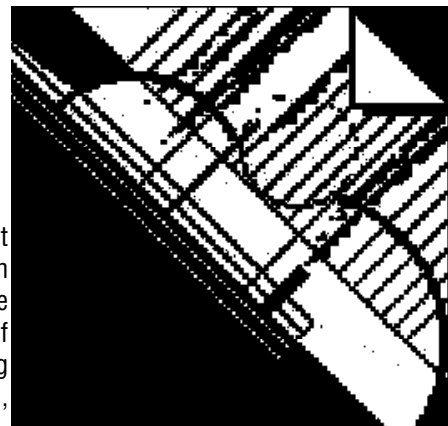
Food comes from gardens and their planting and roots are another theme. Hedley goes to the unseen Miss Sarah for her magical roots to cure his tuberculosis and yearns to make a “plantation” even though the citified Louise tells him to go see a doctor. Canewell brings Vera a Golden Seal plant and extols the virtue of its leaves and roots on colds and other ills. He carefully tells her how to plant the roots. In truth, it is Canewell who wants to put down roots. He is sick of the road music business and is looking for a good women with whom to settle down. Finally, the

tangled, uprooted “roots” of the last scene are the catalyst of the violent and mysterious ending.

As chickens, roosters, food, and gardens are equated with a simple, rustic, rural life, so are two other themes related to urbanity and “city blues.” Almost everybody has a weapon; Floyd has his .38; Louise has her 32 caliber; Carter has a gun; Canewell has his knife and Hedley, his machete. Because Wilson’s characters are trying to change their situations, to make luck happen, they arm themselves. Wilson says this stance is “about black power and self-determination... . Black power means we can alter relationships to society to gain power. We can alter how we see ourselves.” ⁵

Finally, there is justice and jail. Floyd is stopped with empty pockets by the police, arrested for vagrancy, and serves 30 days in the workhouse. Canewell was arrested in Chicago for playing his harmonica, thus disturbing the peace. Red says you need a license to do anything—including walking down the street. These men are punished for doing nothing; ironically, when Floyd commits a crime, he is not apprehended. “Through Floyd, Wilson comments on the discrepancy between black lives and American Justice: ‘Now here’s what I don’t understand. If I go out there and punch a white man in the mouth, they give me five years even if there ain’t no witnesses. Joe Louis beat up a white man in front of 100,000 people and they give him a million dollars. Now you explain that to me.’” ⁶

The play is the urban challenge versus the South’s roots. It is guns and knives versus Miss Tillery’s rooster and, in the end, neither the bullet nor the bird wins.



August Wilson was born in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, the setting of his plays,

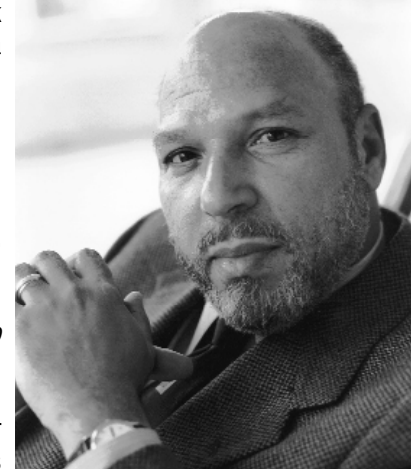
Wilson was born in 1945 in Hill district Pittsburgh, of many of including

ABOUT AUGUST WILSON

Seven Guitars. He first became involved in theatre in the late 1960s as a co-founder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theatre. His first play to be produced—at St. Paul's Penumbra Theatre in 1981—was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, a satirical western Wilson adapted from an earlier series of poems.

After several unsuccessful submissions to the National Playwrights Conference of the O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut, Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted for a workshop in 1982. The workshop marked the beginning of Wilson's association with director Lloyd Richards, head of the Playwrights Conference.

With *Ma Rainey* and his subsequent plays, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, and now *Seven Guitars*, August Wilson has explored the heritage and experience of African Americans over the course of the 20th century. His plays have been produced at regional theatres across the country as well as on Broadway. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for *Fences* (1987) and for *The Piano Lesson* (1990), as well as New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which also won a Drama Desk Award.



He has received several fellowships, including the Rockefeller and Guggenheim Fellowships in playwriting, and is a winner of the Whiting Writers Award. He is an alumnus of New Dramatists, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Mr. Wilson makes his home in Seattle, Washington. He is the father of a daughter, Sakina, and he is married to costume designer Constanza Romero, who designed the production of *Seven Guitars* that began at the Goodman Theatre and eventually went to Broadway.

Prior to the start of rehearsals at the Goodman Theatre, Goodman dramaturg Tom Creamer talked to August Wilson about *Seven Guitars*.

Tom Creamer: I want to start off with the blues, which has had a big influence on your writing, and which is a big part of *Seven Guitars*. Somebody once said that much of Muddy Waters' music was the story of a man from the country stuck in the big city. I'm wondering if that's the story too of Floyd Barton, the bluesman in your play?

August Wilson: Well, I think it may be the story of everyone in the play. Of course the blues came out of the rural areas of the country and particularly blossomed in Chicago during the 30s and 40s. Most of these men were from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Arkansas. They were not from Chicago. So, the story of the man from the country being stuck in the big city may be an internal conflict. There is an internal conflict in the play between Floyd and Canewell. Canewell still clings to the rural values. He still talks about wanting a garden and what he's going to plant, and Floyd is talking about a Buick and a telephone, an icebox and a refrigerator, city things. Canewell still wants an old subsistence kind of lifestyle. It's perfectly satisfying for him to have three rooms and a little garden. So there's this conflict between them and I think that's why Canewell isn't ambitious and doesn't want to go to Chicago. That may be true of Floyd also.

TC: How about some of the other characters? Ruby is from down South; she's come up North, but her attitude is not that of a country girl.

AW: She's country and doesn't want to be country. Ruby is the kind of person who came up North, and two months later forgot all about the South; everybody who came from the South was country to her. It didn't take her but two months to look around and adapt and adjust. There's also people who came up and two years later they're still trying to figure out what the Hell's going on in the city; they're inordinately discontented, wanting to go back home. There were a lot of people who talked about going back, but Ruby's not one of them, she's going to have it down in two months time.

TC: I remember at the O'Neill Conference last summer, during rehearsal one day, you were talking about the differences between the city and the country. Does that still apply to people today? Is that tension still at work?

AW: I think that particular tension has been replaced by some other tensions within the black community. The best example is terms of class. The blacks who made rapid adjustments to the cities were the ones who took advantage of opportunities that were presented by white America. They went to college and became educated and moved into what you call the black middle class. So I think the conflict of the rural south has been replaced by a class struggle or a class conflict within the black community.

TC: Within the city?

AW: Yes, within the city. There's very little distinction made anymore between the country and the city.

TC: At the O'Neill you also talked of the need for people, especially black Americans, to place value on themselves. To find value in self determination. In the play, again, is it Floyd you're thinking about or is it all your characters?

AW: I think it's all of them. They're trying to find a way of relating to society. They're each defining themselves in their own way—Floyd in relation to his music, Hedley in relation to Marcus Garvey and Buddy Bolden and his beliefs. They're all trying to find their values. See, once the store of value that was placed on the body was removed by the emancipation proclamation, you had to find your own value. The value had always been the value of the labor. When you are then free to sell your labor to the highest bidder, you quickly find out that the value is \$4.30 an hour or whatever the minimum wage is. What I'm trying to say is, in order to assert a value you have to find your own value.

TC: In this play, more than your others, there's a lot of violence in the lives of the characters. Ruby's come up North because "somebody done killed some other body." Canewell has his knife, Floyd and Red Carter have their guns, Miss Tillery's son next door is killed.

AW: And the rooster is killed also.

TC: Yes, the rooster, of course. What's going on in this world?

AW: Well, I think the 40s is echoing the 90s. It was a violent time. The violence is integrated almost seamlessly in their lives. It's just like what's going on now. Men in the world have weapons. I always look at this backyard as an arena, an arena with blood and guts, even though it's only chicken blood and chicken guts. It's still blood and guts and men with knives and steel and guitar strings. And women—Ruby representing all of that. And of course one of the main characters in the play is murdered.

TC: Floyd says if one man has a gun then everyone's got to have one.

AW: I think the United States demonstrates that most aptly. Think of nuclear weapons. The Germans were working on a bomb and then we worked on one, because if they had one then we had to have one, and then we tried to outdo Russia tit for tat. You have 27,000, well we have 28,000. I think that's a purely American statement.

TC: You've often said that you wanted your audience to understand that your characters were African, that they came out of an African culture, not a European culture. And in all your plays, someone or something reminds us of Africa, the presence of Africa. How do you see the African presence in *Seven Guitars*?

AW: I think it's in the social intercourse of the people, which is very different than the social intercourse of white people in the 40s, just in terms of the way the people relate to one another. Their social

manners speak to a very African orientation. Specifically, the character of Hedley may carry inside him the largest African response to the world with his concept of the messiah, with the understanding that there's a necessity for a messiah. In that sense, he may be the one who carries the political awareness that blacks are not free and are oppressed. The other characters like Floyd are trying to get some modicum of food, shelter and clothing and something beyond that, like a Buick or whatever. In that sense, Hedley may be the most African of the characters.

TC: Hedley is fascinating in his prophecies. He's like an Old Testament prophet. He also seems to be one of the most damaged characters. He's physically sick. He reminds me of Hambone in *Two Trains Running*. Both are struggling with injustice and the struggle seems to have hurt them somehow.

AW: Yes, that's correct. I call them spectacle characters. I'm not sure why I do that. I always have to have one in every play.

TC: Where do your characters come from? Other playwrights write very personally and one could find the biographies of their friends in their plays. Are there people back in the Hill District of Pittsburgh who are models for your characters?

AW: No, there are not. None of my characters are modeled after anyone. They're all made up out of myself. They're all invented characters. There's no Hedley that I know, there's no Hambone. They're all part of myself. As I write the play, they all sort of walk on stage and announce who they are. I try to keep a balanced palette, if you will, and I want to have some representation. For instance, I wanted someone to carry a political idea in *Seven Guitars*, and Hedley came closest to that out of all the characters in the play. I said, okay, I got that in him. He's a follower of Marcus Garvey. When I was a young man of 25, surprisingly, there were quite a few followers of Garvey still around. Then you begin to orchestrate those ideas and integrate him into the play and it becomes a part of it, and the next thing you know he's doing things that only he would do. That becomes a test, because, if you have a character saying or doing something that another character could say or do, then you're not writing your characters properly.

TC: You're just writing ideas?

AW: You're just writing ideas. But once they become their own selves, you can say, yes, that's what Canewell would have done, and no one else could have done it. I think you're home free from there. At least you got a good start.

TC: When you're writing do you have an audience in mind? Is there a specific audience or an ideal audience?

AW: No. I write for an audience of one, which is the self.

TC: Your own self.

AW: My own self. I have to satisfy me before I can satisfy anyone else. My own particular requirements as an artist, what it is I'm trying to accomplish, I have to answer to that. However, in the craft of playwriting, you have to write with an audience in mind in the sense that the play is going to be viewed by an audience. So you

write for a particular audience, but you are audience aware. You are telling the story to someone and that's important because it will often dictate, in the craft, what you are trying to accomplish.

TC: Speaking of craft, in *Seven Guitars* you are trying something new. You're writing a mystery play with a different structure.

AW: This play has become all kinds of different things from the beginning. I'm torn between wanting it to become more of a mystery and less of a mystery. I think it's unimportant to know who it is that killed Floyd, as opposed to knowing the why of it. It's less tragic if he's killed over an idea. Every time Floyd plays with Hedley, he's coming closer and closer. He's helping to seal his death, but he doesn't realize it.

TC: He's preparing the way?

AW: Yeah, unknowingly. Maybe I should give more clues. For instance, I don't think at the beginning you know that Floyd's throat was cut. I wanted the murderer to possibly be all of them. I didn't want any of the characters to be murderers per se.

TC: My last question is why *Seven Guitars*?

AW: Ah ha. There's seven characters. Each one of the characters is a guitar. I guess I wrote the music and the characters have to play the guitar. Originally, I was going to have seven guys with guitars on the stage and they formed a little orchestra on the street corners. It was about how their world clashed with the white world who saw them as vagrants and as drunkards, and the black community who saw them as carriers of this tradition, these functional oral historians in this world. I was looking at two different ways of looking at blues singers so I had seven guys with seven guitars, then this woman walked on stage and everything changed.

TC: Who showed up first, Ruby or Vera?

AW: It was Vera. It was definitely Vera. She wanted her own story in there. Then I started fiddling with that, but I kept the title of *Seven Guitars*. I think that will play. I hope it will.

TC: I think so. Thank you.



THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE 1940S

by Sally R. Gass

“We had just gone off and demonstrated our allegiance and willingness to fight and die for the country. We actually believed things would be different and that we would be accorded first class citizenship. We came back after the war and that was not true.”

August Wilson 7

don't
The 1940's saw a series of setbacks for the civil rights of African-Americans. In 1940, the NAACP launched a campaign to desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces, sending a seven-point manifesto to President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt promised to create more job opportunities for blacks in the army, but insisted that troops would not be integrated because that would “produce situations destructive to morale.”⁸ However, A. Philip Randolph, a labor leader and one of the nation's foremost African American spokesmen, threatened to organize a mass march in Washington, D. C. in 1941, protesting discrimination in the military and in the defense industry. When government pressure failed to deter his plans, Roosevelt changed his policies and issued Executive Order 8802, banishing federal discrimination. Despite executive orders, at Freeman Field, Indiana, over 100 African American military officers were locked in the stockade after entering a whites-only officers club. In 1943 Detroit, African Americans were excluded from civilian defense-related jobs. A protest riot resulted in 34 deaths. The NAACP reported that 1946 was a grim year in black history, for black veterans suffered blowtorch killings and eye-gougings after returning from a war to end torture and racial extermination.

On the home front, World War II meant many new unskilled defense-related industries, most of which were based in northern and western cities. Poor blacks from the South migrated to these cities in record numbers. In the years between 1941-45, more than 50,000 African Americans moved to Detroit alone. Many white residents of these cities resented black competition for jobs. And also opposed black families living in their neighborhoods. Such opposition occurred in Detroit in 1942, when 1200 whites bearing knives, clubs, and firearms tried to prevent three black families from moving into the 200-unit Sojourner Truth Settlement, designated as black housing by the U.S. Housing Authority. After scores of injuries and arrests occupancy was postponed. When the Philadelphia Transportation Company tried to hire African Americans, 4500 white employees struck in protest. Rioting broke out and President Roosevelt was forced to order an army takeover of the transit system. In Gary, Indiana, 1000 white students in public schools boycotted classes to protest racial integration.

Still, there was some progress. In 1941, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first all-black unit of the air corps, was formed in Tuskegee, Alabama. It would fly more than 500 missions during one year of WW II, before being joined with the 332nd Fighter Group. In 1942, General Douglas MacArthur welcomed black troops for combat duty in the South Pacific, while most other generals dissolved black combat units and re-assigned them to service duty. In 1944, the 92nd Division of the US Army became the first African American unit sent into combat duty in Europe; the 761st Tank Battalion, all African Americans, played a major role in the D-Day invasion in Normandy. Finally, in 1944, the War Department called for an end to segregation in U.S. Army recreation and transportation facilities.



In the arts and sports worlds, African Americans fared better. In 1941, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* was published and also produced as a play. *Othello* opened on Broadway starring Paul Robeson and Hollywood released *Panama Hattie* with Lena Horne; *Stormy Weather* with Lena Horne, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway and Bill Robinson; *Cabin in the Sky* with Eddie Robinson, Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, and Louis

Photo by Margaret Bourke-White

Armstrong. In 1943, and 1948, Joe Louis successfully defended his world heavyweight boxing championship for the 23rd time, and, in 1943, Jackie Robinson became the first black to play major league baseball, joining the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman called upon the U. S. Congress to pass civil rights legislation, with anti-lynching, fair employment and anti-poll-tax provisions. At the Democratic National Convention that year, a civil rights plank was adopted. Yet, the Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina delegations walked out and formed the nucleus of the States' Rights or “Dixiecrat” Party in rebuke to this stand for equal rights. Thus, in the 1940s, for every step forward there was a step back.

**The blues? Ain't no first blues! The blues always been.”
Eubie Blake.**

THE BLUES

by Sally R. Gass

**“All the characters in *Seven Guitars* are living the blues.”
August Wilson 9**

Essential to an understanding of Wilson’s plays is the importance of black music, particularly the blues, which he acknowledges to be an inspiration of his art. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson said that “the blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of people as part of the oral tradition. That is a way of passing along information. The music provides you with an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song.” 10

The blues developed from African and African-American work songs and sorrow songs. Field hollers, shouts, yells, and mournful spirituals provided the structural foundation for the growth of this music. As it took shape, it began to reflect the emotional content of the lives of African Americans—essentially, their struggle to deal with and rise above their depressed lives. The blues thereby became a safety valve that permitted them to release the tension and pressure resulting from daily strife. The cathartic lyrics purged the anxiety brought on by separation, loneliness, and love affairs gone wrong. Thus, the blues became a companion of many blacks. As Ma Rainey says in Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, [the blues] “help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world. You get up knowing whatever your troubles is you can get a grip on them ‘cause the blues done give you an understanding of life.” 11

It is significant that the blues as we know them really came into their own at the turn of the century, during one of the worst periods in the modern history of black America. At that time, African Americans were forced to realize that the freedom on which they had waited all their lives existed only in a legal document with little meaning in the real world. Only the Constitution was amended; little else changed. Attitudes and practices designed to keep them in an underprivileged position still existed. Sharecropping still kept them slaves on plantations and the “Separate but Equal” Supreme Court decision of 1896 segregated them in the communities. It was at this bleak moment in their history that they really created the blues. Just as the work songs, hollers, and spirituals had helped them cope with the despair of slavery, the emotions of the blues now helped them transcend the agony that sprang from freedom without opportunity.

In the 20th century, African Americans migrated to different parts of the country in search of industrial jobs. The blues went with them and took in the unique character of a particular city and its environment. In New Orleans, with its blend of French, Creole and African influence, the blues style was distinctive with its percussive piano rhythms and rocking, vocally suggestive horns. Buddy Bolden, Hedley’s hero, was one of these brass players. In Chicago, the blues took on a lively, dynamic spirit which used harmonica, guitar, keyboard, bass and drums. In 1948, Muddy Waters, Floyd’s hero, was the king of Chicago blues, bringing back the country-style blues, but amplifying the instruments to give the music a highly-charged sound. The “down home” blues dominated the Chicago scene for the next decade.

**“If you get to Chicago before I do
Won’t you tell ‘em about me
Everything that you know
Everywhere that you go
You be in Chicago baby
Won’t you tell ‘em about me.”**

~Pinetop, from “Tell ‘Em About Me.”



Activity Package

By Robin Bennett of the Goodman Theatre and Sally R. Gass

1. What Was Great About 1948?

And what was not-so-great? Below are some questions about that time in America. Some of the answers are in the play, but most are also available in your library, particularly in Time/Life anthologies which provide wonderful ways to see this century's history in pictures. But remember, most published accounts are "dominant culture" history. You might get different answers by questioning people of varying ethnic heritage. History has many different sides!

Who was President of the United States? What political party was dominant?

What were THREE major historical events of the year?

How much did a loaf of bread cost? A postage stamp? A bottle of pop? A gallon of gas?

What was a significant development in race relations that year?

Who was the most important athlete at that time? What was her/his nickname?

What kind of low-cost restaurants were there and what were the usual dishes offered?

What were some differences in ethnic lifestyles: African, Asian, European, Hispanic?

What were "Jim Crow" laws? How did they impact race relations?

Who were the influential African American leaders and organizations of the time?

What were the "hot fashions" and where could ordinary people find them?

Find some "headline news" from a Chicago newspaper and a Pittsburgh newspaper.

2. Themes of the *Seven Guitars Blues*

The recurring themes in Wilson's play move back and forth, from character to character (guitar to guitar), with each character playing on the theme in his or her unique way. The "action" of the plot is brief and accidental, shrouded in mystery that is never fully disclosed. It is the themes of the characters' conversation — their "music" — that form the meat of the play, allowing us to know each of them, to see their connection to each other and to the historical circumstances of their lives.

Listed are repeated themes (you may find some others — include them if you do!). Under each, write where in the play you heard them and what was happening. What do you think their significance was?

Roosters
Songs/Singing
Spiritual/Para-spiritual (ghosts, etc.)
Alcohol
Music Business
Writing/Reading
Performers
Families
Jails/Justice
Violence/Weapons
Money
Bible/Religion
Death
Food
Healing
Mothers
Babies/Generations
Planting/Gardens/ Roots
Men
Women

Example: Miss Sarah's healing roots; planting of the Golden Seal plant; Hedley's desire for a plantation; Canewell's desire to put down roots; the growing baby in Ruth; Floyd's burying something; Canewell noticing that the Golden Seal plant was uprooted.

3. History Projects:

Police Drama: Write a police drama follow-up scene to the end of the play that solves the mystery and uses all the clues in the play.

Seven Generations: This is a long, LONG time! Do you know who your Great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was? Most of us can go back three or four generations at the most. Choose one of the characters and go back and forward in time to create a family tree of seven generations. Write a few lines for one person in each generation that suggest something about her or him.

Justice Stories: Find all the stories in the play that deal with the justice system, police, courts or jail. Find a recent news story that has something in common with each of the stories in the play.

Tracing Roots: Choose a story from the newspaper that interests you, and that reminds you of one of the themes in this play. Rewrite it as if it happened in 1948, using the circumstances (and perhaps some of the characters) of the play.

African American Culture: August Wilson's plays stem from his experience of African American culture. Identify aspects of this culture as seen in the play.

Hedley's Role: Hedley alternates between several roles, including inventor, prophet, entrepreneur, cook and patient. Identify where in the play Hedley plays each (and possible other) roles.

Toussaint Louverture and Marcus Garvey: Research the life and times of Hedley's heroes, and then create a blues song, lyric or poem for each of them.

TB and AIDS: Throughout the play, Hedley's tuberculosis is a major issue. While his friends hope a doctor will help him get better, Hedley sees the medical establishment's lack of attention as a "plot against the black man." He suggests that the authorities who are coming to get him are more interested in getting rid of him than helping him, and that the potions of Miss Sarah have the real power to heal. The recent AIDS epidemic has produced similar emotional responses. Research both diseases, and report on the differences and similarities in the way that patients are treated by groups of people and governmental agencies. Do you think that poor people or members of ethnic or social minorities who have these diseases are treated differently? If they are, describe how and discuss what the reasons might be for the difference in treatment.

Weapons and Violence: The history of violence for African Americans begins with ancestors who were violently brought to this country, and is well documented in Wilson's plays. Yet Red Carter's theory of the "bigger gun" seems to have grown to genocidal proportions in the last 50 years. Hold a debate on this issue within the context of African American history.

4. Creating an Original blues Song

You can write this song alone or in a group.

Write an original blues verse following the instructions below:

A typical blues verse is a 12-bar verse with an AAB form divided into three phrases, four bars (measures for each phrase.) Here's an example:

A: "Woke up this mornin', feeling sad and blue.

A: Woke up this mornin', feeling sad and blue,

B: I had no one to tell my troubles to."

The underlined words or syllables are the strong beats (accents), the pattern is usually the same: unaccented, accented, unaccented, accented, etc.

Experiment with writing a simple melody to fit the words of our blues verse.

Examine the sample verse on this page or in other songs. Your verse should be similar in these ways:

It should be in four/four time with four beats in each measure.

There should generally be four syllables in each measure.

The first syllable (unaccented) should probably be a pick-up note.

The end of each phrase should not have lyrics or words. Instead, there should be a four beat rest for the instruments to take over where the voice drops out (call and response).

Remember to flatten the third, fifth and seventh tones.



5. Who's who

People reveal who they are by what they say, what they sing, what they do and even what they wear. August Wilson relies on his characters and their individual stories more than on traditional dramatic structure or action-filled plot. Wilson says, "None of my characters are modeled after anyone. They're all made up out of myself...as I write the play they all sort of walk on stage, and announce who they are."

Signature Phrases: What line(s) does the character say that reveals most clearly who s/he is. (For example, Bugs Bunny's might be, "What's up, Doc?")

Character Biography: Write what you imagine to be a complete biography of the character. That is take all the information provided in the play and using your imagination, make up the rest to complete the character's life story.

Community Roles/Social Behavior: Describe the role the character plays in the community, how s/he is perceived by the neighbors; the way in which the character is viewed publicly.

Character Relationship Maps: "Map" the character's most important relationships, using any characters you may have invented as part of her or his life story, as well as the characters in or mentioned in the play.

Example: Identify Canewell:

Canewell's signature Phrase:

Canewell's Biography:

Canewell's Roles/Social Behavior:

Create Canewell's Relationship map:

Or pick Floyd, Hedley, Louise, Red, Ruby, Vera instead.

6. AFTER READING THE PLAY Individual or partner projects

The following projects offer opportunities for students to work on a particular aspect of the play or production that interests them. They are only briefly described, allowing for a variety of interpretations and applications.

Letters from the Characters: Choose the character(s) you best understand and, in their individual style, write a letter (or in Floyd's case, dictate it) to another character. Exchange and reply with other students doing the same project.

Language Play: Choose a scene with most or all of the characters, and create a "vocabulary list" of words and phrases that reflect "1948" and the characters' different, specific dialects.

Woman Talk: Choose one of the scenes where the women are speaking to each other with no men present, up until the point where a male character enters. Rewrite the scene as it might take place today, with today's language rhythms and points of view.

Relationships: Choose one of the speeches your favorite character makes about romantic relationships. Describe what you imagine their relationship is like. Then write a three-minute scene between them.

Mother's Day: Choose one of the characters that talks about his or her mother. Begin by noting exactly what the character says, and then, from what you know about the character, write a description of the character's mother. You might also write a short scene between the mother and character when the character was a teenager. Be careful that you describe a specific mother.

Taking a Chance: In Act Two, Floyd talks about "taking a chance" in life. The element of chance, as well as a character's risking something, comes up again and again. Find and document as many moments in the play as you can where "chance" and risk play a part.

Acting Monologues: This play has a wealth of monologue possibilities. Performing a monologue (often done for audition purposes) can allow you to demonstrate exactly who you think the character is, and bring the parts of yourself that is like that character to your performance. Memorizing the lines is important, because you are not free to act until the words belong to you.

Notes

1. Moyers, p167.
2. Wilson, p99.
3. Wilson, p105.
4. Lahr, p101.
5. Taylor, p22.
6. Taylor, p21.
7. Lahr, p99.
8. Cowen and Maguire, p196.
9. Taylor, p21.
10. Moyers, p16.
11. Pereira, p9.

Sources

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